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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 001000

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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E, DRL FOR SJOSEPH  
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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS HERALD 7: THE INEVITABLE - OPPOSITION  
WITHDRAWAL

REF: ADDIS ABABA 00852 AND PREVIOUS

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On April 4, just over one week before the initial polling date (April 13) in Ethiopia's local elections, the largest participating opposition party, the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) formally outlined seven demands that they insist must be met by the National Election Board (NEB) in order for them to remain in the elections. The list reiterated the plethora of problems that the UEDF has complained about to both the NEB and the international community since the election season began - lack of independent NEB administrators at the local level, lack of independent observers, and difficulty registering candidates, among others. In meetings with Ambassador and Emboffs over the last few months, party chairman Dr. Beyene Petros and vice chairman Dr. Merera Gudina have repeatedly said that the UEDF is in the elections only to demonstrate that they have "attempted to participate in the democratic process," but didn't expect to win many seats at the local level or in the by-elections for federal parliamentary seats, as a direct result of restrictions and harassment by the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party. Indeed, neither they nor any other opposition party were able to field a significant number of candidates. According to statistics released by the NEB on March 31, the opposition had less than one percent of the nearly 3.7 million candidates, whereas the EPRDF has a candidate for nearly every available seat in the country. The UEDF said that if the NEB did not meet its demands - which it was certain not to - then they would formally announce a pull-out on April 10, the last allowable day of campaigning. Despite the Ambassador's urging of Dr. Beyene to rethink his strategy of withdrawal, the UEDF gave a press conference in the afternoon of April 10 announcing they are out of the elections. END SUMMARY.

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UEDF GIVES AN ULTIMATUM

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12. (SBU) On April 4, the UEDF, a coalition of opposition parties from the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) and Oromiya region, gave a press conference outlining a list of seven demands of the NEB in order for the

UEDF to remain in the local elections scheduled for April 13

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and 20. They demand that the NEB:

-- Assign independent and neutral election administrators to local NEB offices. They claim that election officials, who are mostly drawn from the civil service, come entirely from the EPRDF party membership and are anything but neutral.

-- Elect polling station observers according to the Electoral Law. The UEDF says that all of the community polling station-level observers, who, according to the Electoral Law, are supposed to be members of the community specifically elected in town-hall forums, were hand selected by the NEB from kebele (locality) administrations (therefore EPRDF party cadres), rather than elected. This would mean that of the 12 observers to be present at every polling station where the UEDF is running (five community members, plus five NEB

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officials, and one each from the EPRDF and UEDF), 11 would be sympathetic to the EPRDF.

-- Deploy election observers from local NGOs. To date, despite repeated promises from the NEB to political parties and the donor community alike, no domestic observation groups have received licenses from the NEB to participate in the elections.

-- Register all denied UEDF candidates who sought permission to run in their local constituency. The UEDF and other opposition groups have detailed countless incidents of harassment of potential or registered candidates (reftel) and claim that the NEB continues to cancel already registered candidates on a daily basis, typically for very questionable reasons.

-- Allocate media time fairly to opposition parties. As a result of the NEB's dubious accounting of party numbers, the EPRDF is granted 14.5 hours of airtime for every one that the UEDF receives.

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-- Suspend the recently issued election code of conduct until all parties have had the opportunity to contribute to its content. Dr. Beyene claims that the UEDF only learned of the code of conduct after the GoE had already accused him of violating it when he criticized the NEB on national media.

-- Ensure that EPRDF harassment and imprisonment of UEDF party members, officials and candidates cease.

13. (SBU) In a meeting with Poloff on April 7, Dr. Beyene and Dr. Merera said that a combination of recent events were collectively the "straw that broke the camel's back." In addition to the alleged recent appointment, rather than election, of election observers for polling stations, Dr. Merera said that the NEB changed the rule on party observer registration. In the 2005 elections, party level observers were easily allowed to be registered at the national level and allowed to do so up to the day before the election. Now, however, observers are required to register locally 10 days in advance. Given the level of harassment and intimidation experienced in the Oromiya region, Dr. Merera said that his party has been unable to convince even one person to act as an observer. Further pushing them to the decision to issue an ultimatum to the NEB (made in an emergency party meeting on April 2) was Dr. Merera's experience the previous weekend in attempting to campaign for one of his party's candidates. Upon arriving at the candidate's constituency to attend a previously planned rally, Dr. Merera was refused access to the city center and had his campaign materials confiscated by

local security forces, telling him that his planned gathering was illegal. As explained by Dr. Beyene, these events, when coupled with the countless other issues they feel were not addressed by the NEB, mean that the UEDF's participation in the elections would only lend legitimacy to the "illegally run election."

14. (SBU) Upon the news of the UEDF's demands, the other staunchly anti-EPRDF opposition group registered in these elections, the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM), reaffirmed its participation. Party leader Bulcha Demeksa informed Poloff that his party officials met on April 9 to discuss the matter of withdrawal, but in the end decided that their original position of participation was the best strategy. Though his party only has 180 candidates registered, and has faced all the same issues that the UEDF has during the run-up to the polling dates, Bulcha said that it is important to the OFDM membership that they make a stand and attempt to participate in the democratic process.

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NEB'S STATS PREDICT LANDSLIDE  
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15. (SBU) On March 31, in response to demands from the donor community, the NEB released party-by-party statistics on the number of registered candidates for the upcoming elections. As expected, the number of candidates is vastly in favor of the ruling EPRDF. The only area in which the opposition fielded a relevant number of candidates is for by-election seats for the federal parliament. However, the seats will be re-elected in 2010 and, even if the opposition is successful, cannot overcome the EPRDF's majority in parliament. Highlights from the statistics include:

-- 36 percent of the 181 candidates for federal parliamentary seats are from the EPRDF, with the remainder from the opposition or individual candidates. However, if including the numerous opposition parties that are discredited and perceived to have been co-opted by the EPRDF, this percentage rises to 61 percent.

-- 62 percent of the 461 candidates for the Addis Ababa City Council are from the EPRDF, with the remainder from opposition or individual candidates. Again, when including psuedo-opposition parties, this rises to 88 percent.

-- 99.4 percent of the 3,596,227 candidates for local elections are from the EPRDF.

Notably, no opposition party had enough candidates to win any of the approximately 30,000 kebele administrations. The UEDF

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is the only party that had enough candidates to win a majority in any woreda (county), with Dr. Beyene estimating that they had fielded enough candidates to potentially win three or four of the approximately 600 woredas in the country. No opposition party had enough candidates to win a zone (district).

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COMMENT: PULLOUT UNFORTUNATE, BUT UNDERSTANDABLE  
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16. (SBU) While it is unfortunate that the UEDF decided to present an ultimatum to the NEB - which almost certainly will lead to the UEDF withdrawal from the local elections - their frustrations are understandable. Since the election season began in January, the UEDF and other opposition parties have faced numerous obstacles and challenges, most stemming from unrelenting harassment and intimidation from the EPRDF. The matter of election observation particularly has the sympathy of the international community, as donors have long been pressing the NEB to complete guidelines for domestic NGOs to take part in observation. Unless they finally do so at the

11th hour, as the courts forced them to do in the 2005 elections, there will be no independent observation groups overseeing these elections. When coupled with the NEB's alleged appointment of EPRDF party members as "independent" polling station observers throughout the country, it has guaranteed that the potential number and validity of opposition complaints will be extremely limited. The statistics released by the NEB indicate that the opposition has virtually no chance at any material gain in representation at any level of government in these elections.

Whether through superior financing and coordination, or through the wide-spread harassment of the opposition, the EPRDF has ensured that it will have no threat to its one-party rule during these local elections. The lack of election observation ensures that no group will likely criticize the election process, but at the same time it will be impossible for anyone to say legitimately that the elections were free and fair. END COMMENT.  
YAMAMOTO